

Chairman Brenner, Vice Chair Blessing, Ranking Member Fedor, and Members of the Senate Primary and Secondary Education Committee,

I would like to first thank you for the opportunity to be here today as a proponent for passing Am. HB105.

My name is Jaclyn Scanlan and I am a Mental Health Therapist providing school-based therapy to high school students in Warren County, OH. I am here today to express the vital importance for passing Erin's Law and bringing this program into our Ohio schools.

It is a bittersweet moment to be here today. As you may be aware, the journey for passing Erin's Law here in Ohio has been in the works since 2014. It has taken 7 years of testimonies from sexual abuse survivors, mental health professionals, and community advocates to get us to where we are today. This has taken far too long to gain the support necessary for educating, empowering and protecting our children. So again, I sincerely thank you for this opportunity to hear our voices, united in this cause.

I have been working in the field of mental health for 20 years. During this time, I have worked with youth in multiple settings such as community outreach programs, youth correctional facilities, outpatient and residential mental health programs, and now in our schools. I am stating this to help you understand that I am not only a member of our community that cares for our children's safety, but a well-seasoned professional that has worked with youth in a variety of placements, with a variety of ages, and with a variety of problems.

One treatment need that I have encountered in every setting that I have worked in, was that of helping victims of sexual abuse. Sexual offenders do not discriminate as to who their victims are. All children are vulnerable to be sexually abused. They are not just the youth that live in poverty. They are not just the youth that "get into trouble". They are not just the youth left unsupervised. It is all of our children that are at risk of being sexually abused with approximately 93% of the time being by the hands of someone they know.

I work with victims of sexual abuse on a daily basis. Daily. Most of which have not disclosed their abuse until later into their teenage years, but it started as young children. I have worked with victims as young as 10 years old that have engaged in self-harm (such as cutting themselves), and have suicidal thoughts due to the guilt and shame that they carry with them about being sexually abused. They feel dirty. They feel alone. They feel as if they aren't worthy of basic human needs of love and safety because of what has happened to them. Sexual abuse victims are more likely to develop drug addictions, depression and PTSD, all of which can carry into their adult lives.

Senators, do you know any 10 year old children? Can you imagine a child that you love and care for wanting to die because of the actions that someone else forced on them? Abuse that the child never asked for. Abuse that can be prevented.

My job as a therapist is to help a victim transform into a survivor. Identifying as a survivor means that the person can feel stronger than their abuse. That the abuse no longer dictates how they feel about themselves. Whether or not their life has value, meaning, or importance. The guilt and shame of being abused no longer is indicative of their worth.

Today you have heard (or will hear) testimonies from survivors of sexual abuse. I ask that you do not consider their words as their "stories". A story implies that it has a beginning, middle and end. The reality of sexual abuse is that while one can certainly heal and move forward to live enriched and successful lives, the trauma of sexual abuse will always be something they have to navigate through. That story doesn't end. Instead, I hope you are absorbing what you are hearing as the daily lives of human beings that are navigating through unimaginable waters. Coping with emotions, thoughts, flashbacks and so much more.

Erin's Law can help prevent a child from being abused. This law provides age-appropriate education that helps students identify and stop what is referred to as "grooming" behaviors. These are the actions that an offender engages in with the victim to create false trust so that the abuse can gradually intensify.

Erin's Law can help a youth that is currently being abused find their voice to not only identify it, but also to report it. It can empower our youth to protect themselves. This empowerment helps a child to see that they are not at fault for the abuse. Empowerment gives the child strength, and ultimately reduces guilt and shame.

Erin's law can help not just those that are victims, but also help to prevent offenders from developing. Let's really think about this. A hard reality that no one wants to look at but is crucial to accept is that somewhere in a classroom, is a youth that will one day grow up to sexually offend.

Take that in for a second: somewhere in a school is a child that will grow up to sexually offend.

But what if that child hears about boundaries? What if that child learns about consent? What if that child learns that a person is someone of value- with emotions, hopes and dreams? That a person is not an object for sexual-gratification.

By passing this bill, you can help protect our children. You can literally save lives.

In about the time that I have been here addressing you, another child was sexually abused. In the amount of time it took me to write this address, three children were abused. Every 9 minutes, a child is sexually abused. So why would we not want to provide support to stop it?

We teach our students to "stop, drop, and roll" for fire safety and prevention. We engage them in DARE to help keep our kids off drugs. Our students, from kindergarteners through high school seniors, engage in active shooter drills by teaching them to "run, hide, or fight". All necessary interventions already taught by our schools.

So I ask you then why would we not want to give them the tools to protect themselves from abuse that is statistically more likely to happen to them than either catching on fire or being shot? When arguing if it is the school's responsibility to do this, the answer is "yes". Because our schools can be a safe haven from this abuse. Our schools can reach a greater number of youth to get this life saving information out there. Our schools can partner with area mental health programs to assist in delivering this curriculum, providing not only education but resources all at the same time.

This law makes sense. It's painful to admit that we need it. But as Senators of the state of Ohio, you not only have the obligation to be a voice for those that voted for you, but also for those too young to have a voice.

I thank you for your time and support of Erin's Law.

I wish you and your family health, safety, and the voice to advocate otherwise.

Thank you.

Jaclyn Scanlan, MSW LISW-S

*Statistics obtained from <https://www.rainn.org/>